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MAY DAY IN AUSTRIA

May Day 1890: « The soldiers are alerted... »

On 11 April 1890, in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* — at that time still a weekly — a long article appeared under the heading « For May Day » (Zum 1. May). The piece had been written by the thirty-eight year old doctor Victor Adler. His persistence and skill a few months earlier nad led to the foundation of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Austria (at the Hainfeld Congress, 30 December 1880-1 January 1881). The youthful Adler had a very sharp pen and his article began: « Anyone who has been following the daily press over the last few weeks must have reached the firm conclusion that on 1st May in this year of grace 1890, the world will undoubtedly swing out of orbit. The Philistines shake their heads doubtfully, the Mandarins waggle their pigtails, while the press weeps, moans and whimpers in all the hypocritical tones of its charming gamut ».

Adler's sarcastic remarks were only too well justified. The ruling classes of the Habsburg monarchy had loosened all their dogs against this Socialist-planned May Day holiday and celebration.

Already on April 4 the governor of the Archduchy of Austria under the Enns informed the public with a decree that « the arbitrary refusal to work on May 1 is legally impermissible and those who allow themselves to be led to such a breach of contract by incitement and deceitful encouragement will also be faced with the consequences of their illegal conduct ». As a so-called breach of contract, voluntary abstention from work was a transgression of industrial order, which could be penalized by arrest and on the employer's part, by immediate

dismissal. The consequences of this vast press campaign of instigation against the May Day celebration are evident in the leading article published in the *Neue Freie Presse* on May 1 1890. The report by this respected organ of the bourgeoisie begins with the following description:

«Vienna, 30 April 1890. The soldiers are alerted, the house-doors are bolted, people are laying in stocks of food at home as though preparing for a siege. The shops are deserted, women and children are afraid to go into the streets, all spirits are oppressed by heavy anxiety. This is the picture of our city on the workers' holiday». Thus the newspapers with their senseless predictions had succeeded in making wide sectors of the population anxious and afraid. Many members of the middle-classes and evidently also some «authoritative» members of government circles had the idea that — as Victor Adler wrote later — «this May-Day would be a sort of Day of Judgment, or at least a day of terror and plundering». Adler continued: «Terror had seized the bourgeoisie and in April (1890) took quite unbelievable forms. To give one example, the Vienna Scientific Club, an association which included the cream of the intelligentzia, decided to cancel its usual spring trip because it would not have been right to abandon wives and children on the 1st of May. Others decided to flee with their families from Vienna before the fatal day».

And what was the scene like in Vienna on Thursday, May 1 1890? An active participant in the celebration, the Socialist Dr. Wilhelm Ellenbogen, described it in his 1895 May Day address: «And then came May Day itself. Quiet streets, closed shops, a dead city. The bourgeoisie, which usually treated the first day of May as a sort of national holiday, an occasion to drive through the Prater park dressed in all their finery, had completely disappeared. Instead, the Prater was heavily occupied by the infantry, cavalry and artillery. Every quarter of an hour infantry battalions and Hussar squads marched demonstratively through the park avenues. Here and there, behind bushes and trees, Uhlan bivouacs could be glimpsed. The whole police force was out on duty, but hidden, mostly on guard inside single houses».

In Graz, not only the public buildings were occupied by the military or the police, but also the bridges leading into the city. The military were everywhere on the alert. The army cooks went shopping accompanied by patrols with bayonets at the ready.

The member of the Imperial Diet, Robert Preussler, recounted

in a commemorative article that «On May Day, a few particularly fearful factory owners heated their cauldrons and gathered the firemen and veterans of their parish around them, in order to reply to a possible assault on their factories by pouring boiling water over the rebels».

Instead of Revolution, a Joyful Procession

According to a well-known saying, revolutions that are announced beforehand never happen. This also applied to May Day 1890. The Socialists allowed neither arguments nor threats to prevent them from abstaining from work on May 1 and organizing marches. But they conducted their demonstrations in a quiet, dignified manner. On April 18, 1890, dr. Victor Adler wrote another article in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* replying to the outcry and threats against the May celebration. He declared quietly and firmly: «No force can forbid us to stop work on May Day. Neither the police nor the army can drag us to work. And if we have to give up our gatherings, even if they try something as impossible as preventing us from taking an afternoon stroll, even if they put soldiers in front of every house-door and force the workers to stay at home, and block the streets with cannons, the fact will remain that in the whole of Austria the machines stop in obedience to the workers' will. This fact is so uplifting and impressive that even if nothing else can be done, we can be satisfied with that. There can be no better proof that the whole of our economic life depends entirely on the workers».

And Adler ended his article with the words: «Our solution, however, remains the same: we will not let ourselves be intimidated or provoked».

The socialist workers followed this admonition. On 1 May they left their work and celebrated their own chosen holiday.

Wilhelm Ellenbogen in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* was able to report enthusiastically: «The workers allowed nothing to stop them from celebrating May Day — neither the explosions of rage of all the bourgeois press in every country, nor the measures taken by the authorities, nor the threat of losing their jobs, nor the demonstrations of military force. They celebrated the day everywhere. The whole civilized world was a great May-field in which millions and millions of proletarians met together in order to establish in common agreement their indispensable demands for the further development of society».

«But perhaps nowhere», the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* went on, «was the manifestation more splendid and unified than in our country. Here, and especially in Vienna, total abstention from work was almost general. According to the numerous reports in front of us, even in the most insignificant, obscure places with only a single factory, the holiday was celebrated. The meetings... can be counted in the hundreds, and the same goes for the celebrations and excursions... And not a single incident!».

«The May Day celebration in Vienna was quite overwhelmingly impressive. Of the sixty meetings held in the morning, many were attended by three or four thousand people... A wonderful sight, that will never be forgotten by anyone present, was the procession of well over one hundred thousand Viennese workers in the Prater».

«And then», Wilhelm Ellenbogen went on, «in the bright beauty of the May Day, the celebrating workers streamed past, with their wives and children, in endless enthusiastic hordes, their faces beaming with joy. They followed the intelligent directions of their own organizers with exemplary discipline, spreading out among various refeshment-places. Amid the loaded rifles and cannons, from one hundred thousand throats simultaneously, the Song of Work (*Lied der Arbeit*) rose to the sky. Every heart was filled with the enthusiasm of knowing that the workers had become a power, that a new era had begun. On that day Vienna was ruled by the proletariat!

In the whole of Austria, at that moment the same enthusiasm flamed».

Victor Adler, who can be considered one of the creators of the workers' May Day, was unable to join in that first celebration in the Prater. He was obliged to spend the day in cell n. 32 of the Vienna Provincial Prison. The man who had successfully fought against anarchism, on 27 June 1889 had been condemned for «anarchistic plots» to a four-month prison sentence and had started to serve his term precisely in the spring of 1890. The long articles that appeared in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* before May Day had been written by Adler in jail and smuggled out. They were so unusually lengthy simply because in prison Adler had enough time and peace to write.

The Socialist congress of 1889

In the summer of 1889, France celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the great revolution of 1789 with a splendid world ex-

hibition in Paris and a parade of brilliant festivities. Triumphant capitalism, which had defeated feudalism in a series of revolutions, displayed all its wealth and power. The three-hundred-meter-high Eiffel Tower was built, overtopping all the church spires in the world, and guests from every country were invited to a Paris radiating beauty and joy. The exhibition was also the occasion for numerous international congresses: meetings of manufacturers, shopkeepers, farmers, doctors, teachers, and Socialists. In fact on July 14, 1889, the day which marked the hundredth anniversary of that world-shaking event, the storming of the Bastille, an International Socialist Workers' congress met in a small hall in Paris. This was the founding congress of the Second Workers' International, the successor of the «International Workers' Association», founded in London in 1864 by Karl Marx and dissolved in 1872. «In this hall», said Paul Lafargue in his inaugural speech, «the apostles of a new idea are gathered».

At the 1889 Paris congress about four hundred delegates were present, representing the Socialist parties of the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Bohemia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States.

The Social Democratic Workers' party of Austria, which had been founded only a few months earlier (on 1 January 1889 at Hainfeld), sent seven delegates to Paris: Dr. Victor Adler, Julius Popp, Emil Kralik, Rudolf Pokorny (Vienna), Josef Hybes (Brünn), Wilhelm Körber (Prague) and Heinrich Dietl (North Bohemia). In many countries, especially in Germany, mass Socialist parties already existed: in other countries, such as Russia and Italy, the Socialist movement was still weak and persecuted.

Victor Adler, reporting on Austria, coined a phrase that was to become famous: «In Austria, despotism rules — mitigated by neglect!» Adler wrote about the 1889 congress in the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* of April 11, 1890: «In July last year a few hundred watched men gathered together. Some of them came from jail, the same fate awaited others in their own countries: others had been condemned to death, and the majority had been driven from their homelands or places of birth. And this horde of "suspicious characters" dared to speak in the name of the working class of all countries!».

Yes, it was a congress of poor, powerless, mocked and persecuted men that met in an obscure hall in Paris. And yet from this workers'

congress a lighted brand was thrown into the world that today still lives and burns!

Weeks before May 1, 1890 the governments and rulers of many countries had been concerned about the Socialist May Day. On April 13, 1890 the Austrian ambassador in Berlin reported that the Imperial Chancellor had communicated to him that «All the workers employed by the Crown and the State, who leave work on May 1, will be punished by immediate dismissal or fines. And the decision has also been taken to prevent all processions and demostrations».

On 15 April 1890 the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Graf Kalnoky, informed the Prime Minister, Graf Taaffe, that he had submitted a report on May Day in Berlin to the Kaiser. According to Kalnoky, Kaiser Wilhelm was determined «to hit them hard», and the necessary orders had already been given!

On April 18, 1890 in Vienna, under the presidency of Kaiser Franz Joseph, a council of ministers took place in which measures against the May Day celebrations were deliberated. In the minutes of the meeting we read: «His Majesty most graciously declares himself in agreement with the point of view taken by the Council of Ministers in this matter and will be happy if energetic measures are taken... Concerning the occasion itself, His Majesty most graciously points out that the wish for a holiday on May 1 is illegal».

How obediently the Kaiser's wish for «energetic measures» was fulfilled has already been shown in the descriptions of the 1890 May Day celebration.

The employers proceeded against the workers celebrating their holliday with even more brutality than the State authorities. In many countries — particulary Germany — they ordered mass lock-outs. They tried to punish the workers who had dared to celebrate May Day by throwing them into hardship and poverty. And the employers continued this struggle against the workers' day for over twenty years. As late as 1913, the German trade unions complained that the lock-outs because of the May Day celebration were laying enormous burdens on them, and asked the Socialdemocratic party to suggest to the coming international congress that the celebration be moved to the first Sunday in May.

At a time when the government and all employers' associations hated the May Day celebration, naturally bourgeois politicians could not love it either. How «respectfully» some of them conducted this battle is shown by the fact that on October 5, 1904, the Mayor of

Vienna, Karl Lueger in an open session on the legislative diet stated that «the people who walk in the Prater on May Day are just riff-raff».

In a hand-bill signed by Franz Schumeier, Anton David and Leopold Winarsky, the Vienna Social Democrats replied: «He calls us "just riff-raff". We are not riff-raff, but we would be if we accepted such an insult. So, Social Democrats, out into the streets! Out to the birthday celebration of the mayor of Vienna! We are going to the Town-hall to offer our riff-raff greetings. We have nothing more — for him. But what we do have, let us bring it to him with all our hearts».

The «homeless companions»

What the ruling classes so particulary hated and resented about the May Day celebration was its international character, the fact that it took place simultaneously in all countries. The enemies of Socialism behaved as though «international» meant «anti-national». The Socialist workers were declared enemies of the nation only because they felt linked in brotherhood to the workers in other countries. As though love for one's own people entailed hatred against others! Very foolish, but since this reproach could be used against Socialism, it was repeatedly thrown in the Socialist' faces.

In its leading article of 1 May 1890, already quoted, the *Neue Freie Press* also wrote: «The saint who is celebrated on 1 May in all countries is called Karl Marx. He invented the abstract worker, who is detached from his native land, a stranger on his own home ground, with no love for his work-place, finding his support only in a belonging which embraces the whole world. May Day sprang from the ghost of the dead International, which broke all the ties of political loyalty and morality, separated the worker from the land of his spiritual birth and wanted to replace all feelings of patriotism by class consciousness».

To Socialists, May Day was, and is, both a day of festivity and a day of struggle. It was created to make the demand for an eight-hour working day irresistible. Already in 1891, in Austria, May Day became a demonstration not only for the eight-hour day, but also for universal, equal and direct voting rights. Repeatedly the workers in every country marched on May Day in support of national demands besides their general international claims. Not without some justifica-

tion was May Day called «rebels' Sunday». Whether the celebratory or the militant character of the day prevails naturally depends on the current political situation and the relative harshness of the anti-working class laws.

May Day 1933 - Verboten

Unquestionably the heritage that the young republic had to take over from the fallen monarchy after the lost war was a tremendous burden. Karl Renner talked about facing «a heap of deserted ruins» — «there is nothing there, or rather less than nothing: debts and deficits». So the new freedom began with privations and disappointments. Lies and stupidity attributed the poverty of the postwar years to democracy, weakening it. When finally the great world economic crisis broke over the young republic with catastrophic force, the enemies of democracy gradually gained the upper hand. In March 1933 the tyranny of Austrian Fascism began. Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, no longer allowed parliament to meet, and step by step took away from the people all the rights to freedom that had been won in the storm of the 1918 revolution.

In 1933, May Day was forbidden. That was a return to the worst era of despotism. The *Wiener Arbeiter Zeitung* of May 2, 1933 wrote: «We have never celebrated a May-day like this one! More than forty years ago, on May 1, by force and discipline the Vienna workers took over the streets, the Ringstrasse. Since then the power of the state has never dared to contest their right to the streets on May Day. Today it happened. The government forbade the Vienna workers to use their own streets, their Ringstrasse. On this May Day Vienna was divided into two unequal parts: inside the barbed-wire barrier that cut off the inner city were the bank buildings and smart hotels, pyramids of arms and machine guns. Outside this barbed-wire frontier the working people of Vienna. And these people, without a shot being fired, without any dramatic clash occurring, won their battle, won the day. They shut us out of one street, and yesterday the whole of Vienna became our parade-street. The Ringstrasse demonstration was forbidden, but yesterday morning in eight main streets there were mass demonstrations of such a size that according to competent judges, the number of participants was far higher than at a normal May Day celebration. The road that the «promenaders» of the Vienna working-class filled yesterday is forty kilometres long.

The Dollfuss government also prohibited the Young Socialists' usual torch-light procession. The Red Youth challenged the ban: they moved their celebration to the Vienna woods. «On Sunday more than fifteen thousand young people», reported the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, «coming from all sides of the Vienna woods, converged at the Dreimarksstein and there in the torchlight made an overwhelming profession of faith in Socialism. Then two enormous columns marched down into the city, filling the streets and parks with challenging battle-songs, rhythmic chants and calls for freedom».

The Austrian Socialists defended themeselves bravely and forcefully against Fascism. Unhappily their efforts were vain - nine months after this celebration, in February 1934, the republic was defeated by the machine-guns, tanks and howitzers of Dollfuss's illegal government. Austrian Fascism, the so-called «Green Fascism», began its reign of terror with gallows, jail and concentration camps.

The light of May-day was extinguished. The night of dictatorship fell over Austria.

The miracle of the resurrection of Socialism and the May Day celebration

Fascism, which brought such undescribable suffering to a large part of humanity, in the spring of 1945 was defeated in the war into which its lust for power had precipitated the world. After eleven years of Fascism, May Day was celebrated in Vienna again. Socialists and Communists together, just as they had fought side by side in the anti-Fascist resistance movement, staged an impressive May Day celebration in Vienna. At that time a large part of Austria was still occupied by the Nazis, and the Fascist terror was living out its last days before the official end of World War II. The 1945 May Day appeal by the Austrian Socialist party stated: «We greet our Socialist fighters still suffering today in the Nazi-fascist prisons and concentration camps, and will never forget the heroes who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom. Our thoughts and warmest wishes are with them all today. And so we celebrate this May Day filled with the proud awareness of the greatness and splendour of the aims of our struggle, and with a feeling of deepest solidarity with the proletariat of all countries and all peoples».

Translated by Margaret Kunzle